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“IF THERE’S A SLUMP IN THIS COUNTRY, THERE’LL BE A CIVIL WAR!”: THE SIMBULE AFFAIR’S REVELATIONS ON BRITISH VIEWS OF RACE AND IMMIGRATION

Luke Voyles

Mentor: Tim Parsons

On April 15, 1967, Zambian High Commissioner to the United Kingdom Ali Simbule referred to Britain as a “humbled toothless bulldog” regarding the settler-dominated nation of Rhodesia. The British newspapers only mentioned the content of Simbule’s words without providing the necessary context. He said his famous statement in response to George Thomas visiting Kenya and Uganda and criticizing the Zambian government’s aggressive stance on Rhodesia. The essay analyzes how the British government, the British civil service, the Conservative member of the House of Commons, newspaper writers, and a large majority of ordinary Britons expressed their outrage at Simbule’s comment. While most Britons did not care about Britain’s imperial power, they cared a great deal about national pride. Immigration and economic dissatisfaction also contributed to the disgust of many Britons toward both Simbule for his remark and the Labour government for failing to prevent his appointment as High Commissioner. Britain could not afford the empire, and the government therefore gave a narrative of benevolent decolonization that stood in stark contrast to other Western European nations. The thesis reveals that most British people did not believe that the nation retained international prestige as Prime Minister Harold Wilson assuaged the government of the United States and Britain faced deflation and would eventually face the devaluation of the pound. Even if a large number of Britons did care about the empire, they resented immigrants for supposedly taking their jobs and hated Simbule for revealing Britain’s weakness, no matter if they had known the context or not. Conservative and Labour politicians took notice, and worked together in proposing a harsher immigration law in 1968 that provided a template for future restrictions on immigration that occurred in 1981 and that continue to this day. Thus, the Simbule affair revealed the underlying resentment that many Britons held toward immigrants that did not directly correspond to the views of their wealthier representatives in the House of Commons, but they were able to influence immigration law for several generations afterward.